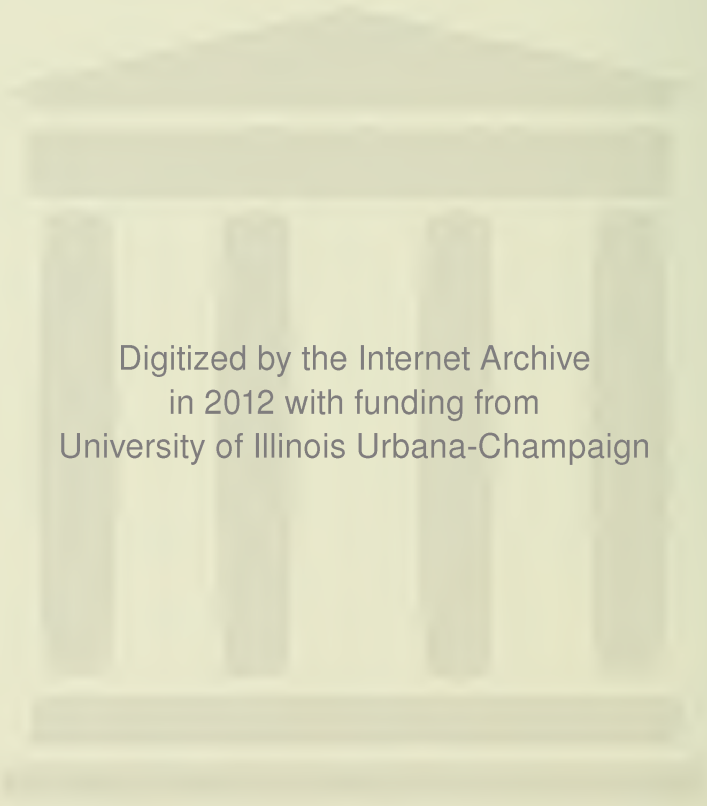
BRUCE CATTON

The Meaning of the CIVIL WAR

CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY
1961



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

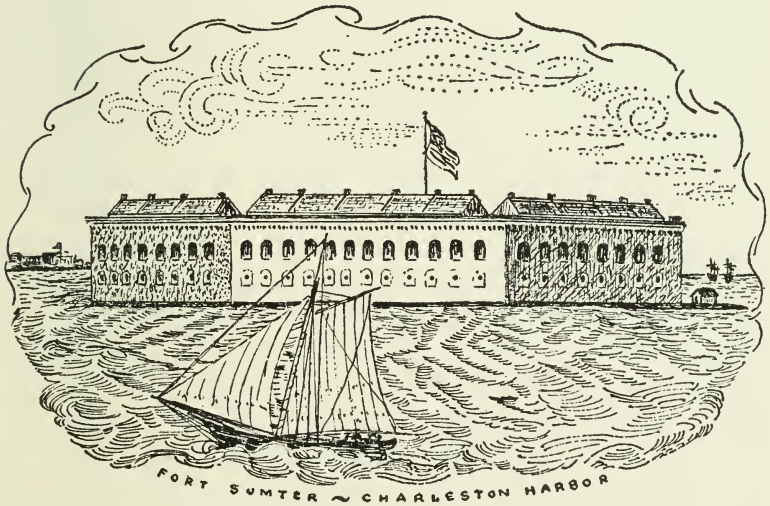
http://www.archive.org/details/meaningofcivilwa00catt

The Meaning of the Civil War

The Meaning of the CIVIL WAR

An Address Delivered at the Chicago Historical Society, April 12, 1961, by

BRUCE CATTON



CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY — *1961*

PUBLISHED UNDER THE PHILIP K. WRIGLEY FUND

©, *1961, by the Chicago Historical Society*
Printed in the United States of America

973.7
C39w

INTRODUCING MR. CATTON

Several years ago, with a series of important anniversaries imminent, the Trustees of the Chicago Historical Society made some basic decisions about the Society's role in these observances. They decided that it should do nothing in the way of celebration. *Instead, it would accept the anniversaries as opportunities for educational endeavors—for informative exhibits, for programs directed toward school children, for lectures by persons who would make genuine contributions to the literature of their subjects.*

In fulfilling the last of these objectives I think we have been unusually successful. In February, 1959, on the occasion of the one-hundred fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, John Hope Franklin spoke before the Society. A year ago, one hundred years after Lincoln was nominated for the Presidency, we had Allan Nevins as our speaker. Tonight, an even century after Beauregard's guns opened on Fort Sumter, our guest is Bruce Catton.

There was never any doubt in our minds about the identity of the person whom we should invite for this occasion. I should probably embarrass Mr. Catton if I described him as the Civil War historian without a peer. I speak no less than the truth, however, when I say that by a shelf of books he has made the Civil War almost a personal experience to millions of readers. In his trilogy—Mr. Lincoln's Army, Glory Road, *and* A Stillness at Appomattox—*he showed the Army of the Potomac as the magnificent fighting force it was;* This Hallowed Ground *stands*

as the best one-volume account of the war from the Union side; his Picture History of the Civil War *has given the great conflict a new dimension;* Grant Moves South *is a worthy continuation of the biography begun by Lloyd Lewis. And as senior editor of* American Heritage *he has helped to arouse and increase the interest of hundreds of thousands in the nation's whole history.*

THEODORE TIEKEN

First Vice President
Chicago Historical Society

The Meaning of the Civil War

We are now beginning the Centennial observance of the American Civil War. One century ago today the Confederate guns began the bombardment of Fort Sumter, opening an unplanned, uncontrollable war that would go on for four years and change the whole course of American history. The event is being commemorated by a great many people, both at Charleston and elsewhere, and it is only the first of many observances which will be held all across the country between now and 1965. During the next four years we are likely to feel that the war's centennial is getting just about as much attention as the war itself got—even though the cost, fortunately, will be substantially less.

Reflecting on all of this, any thoughtful American is bound to have moments in which he asks himself whether the whole business is worth the effort. Why commemorate this war so extensively? Why give it the full treatment, a century after the event? It was such a tragic affair, it took so many lives, it raised so much bitterness and misunderstanding—why not simply forget about it, letting the gravestones and the statues in the war's cemeteries and on its battlefields speak for the deep and lasting remembrance which abides with all of us? What does this centennial really mean, anyway?

Probably the answers to these questions can be summed up fairly well by the remark that the Civil War is something we have to remember whether we want to or not. It was the biggest single event in our national history. In a way it is the central theme of our existence as a people; it is our Iliad, our Odyssey, the one tremendous legend which expresses what we are and what we mean. We can no more ignore it than we can ignore the American Revolution itself. Here was our most significant and tragic experience. We are bound to look back, from the vantage point of a round century, to see what that war did to us and what we got from it.

What it did to us is unforgettable. It was a brutal blood bath which cost approximately 630,000 lives—and that in a country whose total population, North and South together, free men and slaves, was no more than 31,000,000. Not all of our other wars put together, from the Revolution through Korea, sent more young Americans under the sod. Considered merely as a cataclysm—as a time of terror which tried this nation as it was never tried at any other time—the Civil War demands remembrance with a voice that cannot be denied.

But beyond this, the Civil War brought a great nation to birth. In a very real sense, everything that had happened earlier was a time of preparation. The continental destiny of the United States had been taking shape for more than half a century; it took the war to put that destiny into operation. It came to a people who were not entirely sure what they were citizens of—a nation, a section, a state, a league of diverse societies—and it left them one people: a people stunned, almost numbed, nourishing many resentments, bewildered by the immensity of the

shock they had had, but nevertheless united. The United States was at last ready to go on to greatness.

Greatness is partly a matter of size and power, and partly a matter of certain saving intangibles which we will discuss a bit later. We do need to reflect, I think, that the war did coincide with the first real flowering of the great industrial revolution. Of all countries on earth, the United States had the greatest industrial potential, which means a great deal more than simply the chance to pile up wealth. It means that here, better than anywhere else, there was the chance to push the modern industrial process through to its ultimate, to make it mean more goods for more people, to develop the age of improved technologies and techniques in a society dedicated to the greatest good for the greatest number. That development is by no means complete, even now, but we have seen enough of it to see how powerfully it can transform the lives of men. Bear in mind that the Civil War applied a forced draft to the entire process; also, that it left the nation in shape to carry on with the job. The dazzling record of physical growth which makes up so much of the story of our past century would be very different without the Civil War.

But of course we do not look on those war years just because they touched off the era of industrial expansion. We are pulled, in addition, by an irresistible force of sentiment. Whether we like the idea or not, the Civil War exerts a romantic appeal which affects all of us. It created huge legends, and all of the legends have an element of truth in them.

There is a certain danger here. If we are not careful we may become prisoners of the Cival War—prisoners of its romance, of its legendry, of the odd, heart-warming and

ever-living impulses which its people, its flags, its songs and its stories send tingling along the spine. As we proceed with the centennial observance, let us not allow a sentimental haze to cloud the landscape so that we fail to see the deep, tragic issues and the profound lessons which were involved. If we treat the whole business as a bright and moving pageant we will waste the whole centennial period, turning what should be a time for sober reflection into a gay party at a colorful musical comedy.

It may be hard to retain our balance, because the sentimental appeal of the Civil War story is perfectly valid. I don't suppose even the coldest of us is entirely immune to it, and some of us are not immune at all—are not immune, and don't want to be.

No period is so rich in memorable characters—people who, whether they did well or did badly, were at least fascinating in their personalities and their deeds.

The Northerner is just like the Southerner, for instance, in his reaction to Jeb Stuart. Here was a wholly improbable man—a first rate soldier, hard fighter, competent as a general, completely devoted to the cause he served . . . who was at the same time a show-off, a man consciously living the tradition of the romantic cavalier, a man who made even the terrible trade of war seem like fun, a man who fought with gaiety and dash. Where else, in that somewhat dun-colored age, will you find a general who wore a flowing cape with scarlet lining, carried an ostrich plume in his hat when he rode into battle, and led his troops down the roads of war with a banjo player at his side strumming out "Kathleen Mavourneen"? Jeb Stuart said, "I would rather die than be whipped," and he had his way: he was killed in action before he had to see the col-

lapse of the Confederate cause, and I am sure he would have preferred it that way. Make of him what you choose, he is at least a man who compels a lingering backward glance.

For contrast, there was Nathan Bedford Forrest, another Confederate cavalryman—Stuart's precise opposite in everything except military competence. Forrest may, just possibly, have been the greatest military genius of the whole war, on either side. It is hard to be sure, because the Confederacy never quite found out how to make full use of his immense talents. He was rough, unschooled, uncouth, a former slave trader in a society which used slaves but despised men who lived by their sale and purchase. He never bothered to strike an attitude. Asked to give his definition of strategy, he defined it in homespun words—it simply meant, he said, to get there first with the most men. . . . Do not ever, I beg of you, believe that Forrest said "get there fustest with the mostest men." That was not the locution he used, and while his definition of strategy was widely published and quoted before the war even ended, the "fustest and mostest" business did not appear in print until nearly forty years later.

Forrest lacked military formality. Once a junior officer wrote out an application for leave. Forrest rejected it and returned it, and the young officer sent it in again; and again it was turned down. A third time the officer sent the application along, and this time Forrest put an end to it. Across the bottom of the application he scrawled vigorously: "I have tole you twice goddam it No."

On the Northern side, there was William Tecumseh Sherman, another man at whom we have to look back. Sherman was rough and tough and cruel—and under it all

he was a sentimentalist, as is the case with so many tough and cruel people. Southerners find it hard to believe, but he had a deeper feeling of affection for the Southland, probably, than any other Union general. He felt at home there, and he liked the people: the only trouble was that he had an odd way of showing it. Sherman had a genius for tough talk, which has clouded his fame just a little; it sometimes almost seems as if he wore toughness for a cloak the way Jeb Stuart wore gray and scarlet. He was a romanticist in regard to war, and yet he was the first of the modern war-makers; a grim man with a streak of scarlet across his heart, a man who wanted to hang newspaper reporters —he thought war correspondents were quite unnecessary, because all soldiers wrote letters to the folks back home and as far as Sherman could see those letters would tell the people all they needed to know about how the war was going. He summed up his experience by remarking that war is hell, and it must be added he did his best to prove the truth of that remark. For better or for worse, he is one of the unforgettable soldiers.

Then there was that quiet, mysterious man, General Ulysses S. Grant.

Grant was a slouchy little man who could never manage to strike an attitude; a common-sense sort of person who was modest and self-effacing on the surface, tenderhearted with a core of solid iron. He came out of the war with an oddly spotted reputation, which seems not to have bothered him very much. He was said to have drunk too much—which, by the way, was not true—and he was also supposed to be a simple-minded butcher, a man who swung a heavy club with scant regard for the human costs involved. But it was Grant who won the war: Grant who

knew how to take the superior resources of the North and apply the pressure until the Confederacy collapsed; and Grant, too, who displayed rare magnanimity at the very end, working for a peace that would mean genuine reconciliation and a healing of wounds. Our society has rarely been served better by anyone than it was served by Grant at Appomattox, when he gave his beaten foe a peace they could live up to and put hangings and reprisals forever out of the reach of the vengeful minority in the North who would have resorted to such things if they had been able to do so. I do not believe we ever produced a better soldier than General Grant.

It would be possible to go on and on with the portrait gallery; the point is that these unforgettable men from the Civil War keep jogging our elbows, calling for our attention. But there are other unforgettable men: the private soldiers of the Northern and Southern armies, the men who endured much and dared greatly, the unsung men who paid the bill for the bright deeds which the generals have to their credit.

Civil War soldiers were so unlike modern soldiers—and, at the same time, so very much like them. They got poor training and they had a loose and informal discipline. Nobody ever bothered to indoctrinate them. Most of them were volunteers, men who were in the army because they once wanted to get in it and not because somebody made them go. Food, housing and medical care were atrocious, and leadership—especially on the company and regimental level, which is where it counts—was, all too often, very bad indeed. Yet these men did things on the field which still command our admiration. They fought one another with grim determination but without rancor, and now and

then they displayed a valor so fantastic that we find it hard to believe.

There were, for instance, two regiments which can represent many—the 24th Michigan and the 35th North Carolina, which collided head-on on the afternoon of the first day's fight at Gettysburg. They fought together for an hour, perhaps, or for an hour and a half, and then the Michigan regiment went off in retreat. Each regiment had lost approximately 80 per cent of its numbers. In other words, four out of every five men on each side had been shot down. Bear in mind, now, that the discipline then was loose. It was always possible for a soldier to "goof off" in the heat of battle, and it was not uncommon for a good fourth of the men engaged in any fight to fade quietly away from the firing line, rejoining the outfit later with no questions asked. But these boys from Michigan and North Carolina did not do that. The military machine was so loose that they could have run away if they had chosen to do so, but they did not. They stayed and fought, and the endurance they displayed is one of the reasons why we keep looking back at that war. As the old chronicler Froissart said of men in a war centuries earlier: "They were very valiant; they did not care for their lives."

Well, there were men like that—our ancestors—and they died a long time ago, and by now the pain and the terror and the deaths have been filtered out and we remember only the incredible courage—which is one more reason why we are compelled to do something to mark the centennial anniversary of those great Americans.

To our lasting good fortune, also, there has been a healing of wounds. Human history does not know anything very much finer than the fact that this great war was suc-

ceeded by a peace of genuine reconciliation. In the eyes of the government that finally won, that war was a rebellion, put down at staggering cost—but the victory was followed by no hangings and no proscription lists. The South did not become another Ireland or another Poland, always ruled by force, permanently embittered, nourishing an abiding hatred which the years could not bury. No other country can show a record like this one. Robert E. Lee is a national hero today, and his former home at Arlington has become one of our most cherished shrines. The Union has been restored, not just technically but in the minds and hearts of the people of both sections.

But let us not deceive ourselves. The Civil War was not just a tournament in which brave men did gallant things for the admiration of later generations. It was not a romantic "war among brothers" in which nobody was really angry about anything. Time does heal the old wounds; but must we assume that the shattering issues which lay at the bottom of that war have disappeared forever under a warm layer of sentimental good fellowship? Do we contribute anything to the still-continuing healing process if we heedlessly submerge the central meaning of the entire conflict?

It is that central meaning which we need to direct our attention to as we observe the Civil War's centennial.

The Civil War was *about* something. It was fought *for* something. And—let us never for a moment forget it—it *won* something.

Under everything else, the war was about Negro slavery.

It was fought for freedom—and if ever anything was worth fighting a war for, freedom was and is the cause. The war *won* freedom—for the slaves, and for the people

who owned the slaves, for all of the people in both sections who in one way or another had consented to slavery. (Never forget the old saying: you cannot keep any man in the ditch without finally getting down into the ditch with him.) The Civil War turned the Negro from a chattel slave into an American citizen, and it left us with the eternal and completely inescapable obligation to see to it that the citizenship is made good. There could be no greater absurdity than an attempt to commemorate any Civil War anniversary on a basis which would deprive Negro citizens of the right to attend. Unless the Negro can join freely and fully in all national centennial ceremonies, the ceremonies are not worth ten minutes of anybody's time.

And that is why the Civil War is worth remembering.

It gave us a broader freedom, and it laid upon us the obligation to live up to that freedom and to make it ununlimited, for everybody. Freedom is indivisible. Winning it for the Negro, we won it also for all of the people who then were or ever would become Americans—for the man who has fled from oppression, misery and discrimination overseas as well as for the fugitive from the American slave pen and auction block. We can never have, permanently, a second-class citizenship in this country; because of the Civil War, we are no longer that kind of country. We might just as well stop trying to find a comfortable middle ground between the ideas of Abraham Lincoln and Adolf Hitler. There simply isn't any such place.

The Civil War left us forever dedicated to the effort to make a working reality of the brotherhood of man. It may be tough—we worship the Christian ideal in the abstract, but we are apt to get a little skittish when we are called

upon to put it into effect—but there is no escape. When we mark the Civil War centennial, that is what we are talking about, really; freedom, freedom broad enough to encompass all men, of all races and nations and creeds. We bought that concept at the price of more than 600,000 lives. How can we for one moment forget it?

This is not just an abstraction. It is, in the last analysis, the thing that makes America great.

A few minutes ago I mentioned the fact that the foundation for our greatness comes very largely out of the Civil War. Now national greatness is not just a matter of wealth and power and dominion. Those things are very good, but the spirit behind them is what finally has power with the hearts of men. We live today in a time when downtrodden people all over the world are rising up in a tremendous effort to win freedom for themselves. The fact that many of these people have an imperfect idea of what freedom is, and are poorly fitted to take advantage of it when they get it, is beside the point. Freedom they want and freedom they are going to have, and the world is in a turmoil because of it.

Can our country, the United States of America, have a greater asset in times like these than the fact that more than any other people we turned this vision of freedom loose in the world?

Does anything—can anything, conceivably—contribute so much to our greatness as the fact that under everything else, our society, our flag, our way of life *mean* freedom?

The other day Vice President Lyndon Johnson was in Senegal, where he was given the warmest of receptions by many thousands of black people. Congratulating the Senegalese on their independence, Vice President Johnson went

on to say that they must value independence, "not as an end in itself, but as a means to improve the lot and enlarge the opportunities of all the people." Does that not say it for us? Is not that what we finally won in the Civil War—a concept of a society in which black men and white men alike are free, free to go on together and "improve the lot and enlarge the opportunities" of everyone? Is not that something abundantly worth our ceremonies of commemoration during the next four years?

There is one story I would like to tie in with this story of Mr. Johnson addressing the people of Senegal.

Somewhere in the winter of 1863, twenty or thirty slaves escaped from some plantation or plantations along the North Carolina coast, made their way to the Carolina sounds, found some ancient scow or flatboat, and put out to reach a Federal fort which lay off beyond the horizon on the sand banks to the east. They had had a hard trip of it. They were exhausted, all but starved, and the trip across the sound was full of peril. But later, after they had come inside the Union lines, the Negro who had led them explained that at dawn, as they finished their crossing, they saw the Union fort and its flagpole, with the Stars and Stripes floating in the light, and he said:

"When I saw that flag, my heart lift up."

There, I submit to you, is something on which we can confidently ride through the terrifying years of the latter half of the twentieth century, when hundreds of millions of people who never had anything are coming up to find their own place in the sunlight. We can ride on it because we got it out of the Civil War. All we need to do is remember it—and live up to it.

Our flag means freedom. Real freedom: not a limited,

segregated, thank-you-massa sort of freedom, but something unlimited, as broad as the skies above us. That is the greatest national asset we possess. Do we need to be afraid of anything on earth as long as we are true to that?

The flag means America: it means the vision that finally determines what we are trying to do and be, what we ultimately stand for, what we are willing to die for and to live for. A century ago the most luckless folk in all the world saw it so. They were black men and women who had lived below the bottom rung of the ladder; men and women who were hardly even people, who had been classed with the ox and the mule as bits of animate property, men and women who could be owned, who could be bought and sold, whose horizon had always been limited by the eaves of the nearest cabin in the slave quarters. These men and women had broken away, and they were bound for something better—bound out for a chance to live, to be their own instead of somebody else's, to develop so that some day, somehow, their children or their children's children could stand erect and could recognize themselves as the immortal sons and daughters of an everliving God. They crossed a deep sea in the darkness of night, and in the morning they saw the emblem of what they had so pathetically hunted, fluttering in the sea breeze at the top of a flagpole above the powerful guns.

And what they said then gives us our greatest, most compelling reason to observe the centennial of the Civil War.

It is a trumpet call—that cry from the middle of the bottomless pit—

"When I saw *that flag* my heart lift up."